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ABSTRACT

Three demographic rates and the social reality they measure signify important, continuing changes in the Swedish family. As compared with the rest of the industrial world, the Swedish now have the lowest marriage rate, the highest non-marital cohabitation rate, and possibly the highest family dissolution rate. Contents of this article focus on the history of nuptuality in Sweden, the gradual replacement of marriage by non-marital cohabitation, and the high rate of divorce in Sweden. Particular attention is given to the sharp drop in the marriage rate that occurred in Sweden during the mid-1960s, the disinclination of Swedes to marry simply because a first or second child is expected or has been born, the Swedish "deinstitutionalization of marriage," the need for data on the break-up rate of consensual unions, and the high percentage of single parent families in Sweden. Because Sweden may have the highest rate of family dissolution in the industrial world, it is concluded that more research and public discussion about the possible personal and social consequences of current Swedish family trends is needed. (RH)

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SOCIAL CHANGE IN SWEDEN

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WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE FAMILY IN SWEDEN?

by David Popenoe

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In recent political and cultural debate in Sweden the "condition" of the Swedish family has been given increasing attention. Surprisingly, however, only the material or economic condition has been the focus of concern. What is also of interest, at least to the outside world, is the non-material or social condition of the Swedish family. About this dimension of the family Swedes, at least in public, have been virtually silent.

Concerning the Swedish family's social condition a crossnational examination of recent demographic and social data reveals some significant developments. The Swedish marriage rate is now the lowest in the industrial world, and the non-marital cohabitation rate is the highest in the industrial world. These facts will come as no surprise to most Swedes. More surprising, however, is that the rate of family dissolution in Sweden may also have become the highest in the industrial world. These three rates and the social reality they measure, which are discussed in this article, signify important, continuing changes in the Swedish family that go well beyond its economic condition.

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MARRIAGE

Until recent decades the history of nuptuality in Sweden had not shown any remarkable differences from comparable European nations, except for somewhat lower rates of marriage during some time periods. Swedish marriage records go back to 1749 and it is possible to compute the crude marriage rate for every year since then. The proportion of married women in the age group 20-44 years, for example, was 59.4 in 1750 and then dropped (although with many ups and downs) to 52.1 in 1900, which was a low point. During this century the marriage rate rose rapidly, however, passing its earlier high and reaching a peak in the mid-1960's. The percentage of married women in the 20-44 age group in 1970 was 70.4. Prior to 1900 more men than women married, but in this century the pattern reversed itself with the number of married women outdistancing married men (in 1970 only 61.5% of Swedish men in the age group 20-49 years were married). But the important point is that marriage was never so popular with either sex than it was in the 1950's and early 1960's, and this was as true of Sweden as it was of other countries.

Beginning in the mid-1960's, however, the picture changed with startling rapidity. While the marriage rate in most other advanced nations leveled off or in some cases continued to increase, Sweden's began to drop sharply. During a seven or eight year period following 1966, according to calculations made by Swedish family sociologist Jan Trost, the marriage rate decreased by about 40%, a decrease which he believes has not occurred "anywhere else or at any other time." The drop was even greater for the younger age groups. For women aged 20-24, the marriage rate (per thousand women) dropped from 194 in 1966 to 91 in 1973, and for women aged 25-29 the comparable drop was from 175 to 96. By 1980 these rates had dropped much further still, to 53 for the 20-24 age group and 78 for the 25-29 age group. An international comparison with Sweden's 1980 marriage rate of 78 for persons in the 25-29 age group shows Denmark, 99; Japan, 109; France, 117; the U.S., 127; and England and Wales, 168. The 1980 Swedish rate was also considerably below the other countries in the 20-24 and 30-34 age groups. The declining marriage rates in Sweden (as elsewhere) reflect a rising average age of marriage. But in addition, a growing number of Swedes are not marrying at all.

Today, Sweden has the lowest marriage rate in the industrial world and at the same time one of the highest mean ages of first marriage -- 30 for men and 27 for women (1983) -- compared to 25.5 for men and 23.3 for women in the U.S. (1985). The marriage rate in Sweden increased slightly in the mid-1970's and since then has continued to drop, although the total number of marriages per year has followed a slightly different trend, with some increase in the early 1980's.

NON-MARITAL COHABITATION

One must not assume, however, that since marriage in Sweden is going out of fashion, people there no longer are "coupling." What has happened is that marriage is gradually being replaced by non-marital cohabitation, also called consensual unions or "living together in an unmarried state." Although precise data on the amount of non-marital cohabitation in Sweden today are not available, few Swedish experts would contest the proposition that the rate is the highest in the industrial world.

Due to the lack of legal registry and a fixed date of inception, data on non-marital cohabitation are much more difficult to assemble than marriage data. And making comparisons among nations is also fraught with difficulty. Many careful estimates of the amount of non-marital cohabitation in Sweden have been made, however. Unmarried couples as a percent of all couples in Sweden was estimated to be 1% in 1960, 7% in 1970, 13% in 1975 and 21% in 1983. Projecting these data, an educated guess about the situation today is close to 25%. Comparable estimates for other European nations are 7% (late-1970's) for the Netherlands; 2.5% for Britain and 13% for France. (In this and many other aspects of family life Denmark is only a few steps behind Sweden.) For the United States, unmarried couples as a percentage of all couples in 1981 was estimated to be 4% and today is probably about 5%. Interestingly, the U.S. percentage apparently did not increase in the last year (i.e. between 1984 and 1985) whereas in Sweden there is no statistical indication of any diminution of this trend.

The data given above for Sweden refer to couples of all ages. If one looks at the younger age groupings the picture changes considerably. In 1980, the percent of unmarried women ages 20-24 living with someone else was 68% (79% for men) and in ages 25-29 the percent was 35% (49% for men). Moreover, virtually all Swedes now cohabit before marriage (only an estimated 2% of marriages today were not preceded by non-marital cohabitation, compared to nearly 50% among women born in the 1930's).

Living together before marriage is an old custom in Sweden; Swedes have long been permissive in matters of pre-marital sex in terms of allowing "engaged" couples not to have to wait until the actual marriage takes place, and the marriage commonly occurred around the time the first child was coming due. By one estimate a third of all marriages in 1963 involved a pregnant bride. But it is only in this sense that non-marital cohabitation has been a widespread Swedish tradition, and the situation today has changed considerably. Non-marital cohabitation is now regarded legally and culturally as an accepted alternative rather than a prelude to marriage. This is reflected in the fact that the average length of time couples remain unmarried lengthens each year, with a growing number, as noted above, never marrying at all. Accoring to one recent study only 20% of young, childless women born in the 1950's married their cohabiting partner within eight years, compared to 80% of those born at the end of the 1930's.

One of the most striking changes in the cohabitation scene today is that children no longer are much of a reason to get married; in other words, the expectation or birth of a child affects only marginally the chances that a couple will marry, and this applies to both first and second children. The rapidly declining influence of childbirth on marriage is brought into relief by the data on the percentage of children born out-of-wedlock. Officially, the concept of children born out-of-wedlock was dropped from all Swedish legislation in the early 1970's (the term illegitimate was dropped in 1917), and children of such unions have exactly the same rights as do children of married unions. From Swedish population registration records, however, one can calculate the percentage of all children born in a given year who are born to unmarried mothers. This figure has climbed sharply in recent years, from 10% in 1956, 22% in 1971, and 32% in 1975. In 1984 the percentage stod at 45%, giving foreign journalists the occasion to state that nearly half of all births in Sweden today are to unmarried

parents. The comparable figure for the United States (1983) is 20%. (It should be emphasized that in Sweden, due to the high rate of non-marital cohabitation, the concept "born to an unmarried parent" usually does not mean "born to a single parent.")

What, in general, is the social significance of the decline in marriage and the rise of non-marital cohabitation? Many Swedes (especially younger Swedes) see little if any significance. And it has been government policy since the change in divorce laws of the early 1970's, according to the interpretation of some Swedish experts, to be officially "neutral" between the two forms of living together. Some observers maintain that non-marital cohabitation has become an institution almost equivalent to that of marriage; "the two social institutions do not "compete" with each other but they exist along side each other." This near equivalence was reflected in recent changes in Swedish family law. A great many different reasons are invoked by Swedish non-marital cohabitors to account for their not getting married: freedom from oppressive tradition, freedom from state control, and more commonly, "what difference does it make; it is our love that counts." A typical response to the question, "why not marry?" is "why marry?."

Yet because it is such a radical departure from cultural practice throughout world history, this Swedish "deinstitutionalization of marriage" surely deserves more analysis and public discussion, in terms of possible long run social implications, than it has received. In all of human history, after all, marriage has been the basis of the family as a social institution. Virtually all societies heretofore have made the marriage ceremony one of the most significant ceremonies in their members' lives. It has been a ceremony in which family, religion, and society express their approval of an hopes for, as well as setting down the moral and legal rights and duties of, a union between two people who are expected to contribute to the continuance of the society through legitimized procreation.

In Sweden such a social expression is disappearing; it is reasonable to say that most Swedish young people today are merely drifting away from their families of orientation, usually in stages, and eventually settling with someone else, all seemingly without any form of public or social recognition. Gone for the most part are engagement parties, weddings, and even an appropriate time at which one can say "congratulations." Indeed, the life course of marriage-like relationships in Sweden is not easy to bring into focus. This is pointed up by a "marital history" that one Swedish couple gave to me: They met in 1967, moved in together in 1969, exchanged rings in 1973 (this was around the time their first child was born and was for the purpose of "showing others that they were attached"), and married in 1977. When asked what anniversary they celebrated, they responded: "the day we met."

The most important social consequence of non-marital cohabitation may be a behavioral one. As noted by Swedish demographers Jan Hoem and Bo Rennermalm, "the distinction between non-marital cohabitation and marriage is still important for individual conduct in Sweden.....the universal acceptance of previously unconventional living arrangements has not erased differentials in behavior." They are referring particularly to the high rate of family dissolution among unmarried couples as compared to married couples.

FAMILY DISSOLUTION

Under this heading first consideration is typically given to the dissolution of marriage as reflected in official divorce statistics. The divorce rate has never been a very adequate indicator of family dissolution in a society (to say nothing of the level of marital happiness) but its adequacy has improved in recent decades as the legal bases for divorce in advanced societies have liberalized. Divorce rates have shown a long term increase in most Western nations since around the turn of the 20th century; they reached a high point in many countries right after the World War II, then declined through the fifties only to begin rising again during the sixties to their current high level, probably the highest in the modern history of these nations. The Swedish divorce rate was one of the highest in Europe following World War II and since then, beginning in 1963, it has climbed faster than in most other countries and is still climbing. In the number of divorced persons per 100 married persons, Sweden's rate in recent years (9.69) falls just behind that of the Western world's acknowledged divorce leader, the United States (11.28).

Of the many different rates of divorce that can be calculated, one of the most useful is the proportion of marriages expected to end in divorce over the life course of a given cohort (rather than ending in the death of one of the partners). For the cohort of people born in the U.S. in 1945 the proportion of marriages (for males) ending in divorce is expected to be 42%, while in Sweden the figure is 36%. For other countries examined the rates are: England and Wales, 27%; Switzerland, 14%; and Belgium, 12%.

The high Swedish divorce rate is surprising because so many of the factors traditionally associated with divorce in the U.S. are mitigated in Sweden, such factors as poverty, teen pregnancies, early marriage, inter-ethnic and inter-faith unions, and high residential mobility. But perhaps the most surprising thing about the high Swedish divorce rate concerns the amount of non-marital cohabitation. One could think of many such non-marital unions as "trial marriages" in which the step of formal marriage is taken only after the union has matured and the couple desires to signify a certain permanence to the relationship. As the thesis was put by one scholar some years ago: "the decrease in the marriage rate is the result of an increase in trial marriages, and therefore... those marriages being formed will be "happier" and thus the divorce rate, ceterus paribus, will be lower." Based on information currently available this thesis is far from correct. The marriage rate continues to drop while the divorce rate continues to climb.

Because so many Swedes no longer marry, however, the use of divorce rates to measure family dissolution in Sweden becomes rather meaningless, especially when making comparisons with nations where the amount of non-marital cohabitation is relatively low. What is needed is the addition of some measure of the break-up rate of couples living outside of marriage in consensual unions. Yet if it is difficult to get data about the formation of such unions, it is even more difficult to get information about their break-up. There are also numerous problems in comparing the break-up rate of non-marital cohabitants with that of married couples because, as noted above, marriages in Sweden today represent a kind of final stage of a cohabiting relationship; that is, almost all marriages are preceded by a stage of non-marital cohabitation.

To avoid including "casual cohabitation" in the measure of family dissolution, which one expects by definition would have a much higher break-up rate than marriages, it is useful to look at the break-up rate of couples, both married and unmarried, who have had a child. This, in fact, has been done for a special sample of 4300 Swedish women, born between 1936 and 1960, who were asked retrospective qustions about their life histories. The findings showed the dissolution rate of cohabiting couples with one child to be three times the dissolution rate of comparable married couples, on the average. For cohorts coming of marriageable age today, because of recent increases in non-marital cohabitation and its wider cultural acceptance, this difference in dissolution rates has undoubtedly diminished. Yet it is unlikely that the difference has disappeared (differences of similar magnitude have been found in a number of other, smaller scale, studies) and it seems a well-based conclusion that non-marital cohabitation, at least at the present time, simply does not have the durability of marital cohabitation.

If the non-marital cohabitation dissolution rate is added to Sweden's already high and growing divorce rate, it is reasonable to put forth the following proposition: Sweden may have the highest rate of family break-up in the industrialized world. That a society so resolutely devoted to social welfare and the good life should have achieved such a position has received remarkably little discussion. Family dissolution is a subject Swedes do not like to talk about; unlike almost every other common "social problem," for example, it has never been the focus of a major, government sponsored investigation.

Of course the significance of such a comparatively high rate of family dissolution, in terms of its personal and social consequences, is a matter of widely conflicting opinion. On the positive side are those who maintain that adults are better off psychologically because of it, that it shows how strained many marriages actually were before the time of easy divorce, and that it represents a positive good in helping to destroy an oppressive institution. Arguments on the negative side include a loss of "family values," a weakening in the "social control" of adolescents, and especially psychological damage to the children and youth who are involved. Children under 18 are involved in about two thirds of all divorce actions in Sweden (the comparable number for non-marital cohabitation dissolutions is not known). It is the opinion of many social scientists that, while recognizing there are numerous cases where children of dissolution are better off than in a deeply troubled family, family break-up can create lasting pyschological problems in children. On this most Swedes with whom I have spoken agree, and the opinion also seems widely held in other advanced countries.

Sometimes it is pointed out that the percentage of broken families today is little different from what it was at the turn of the century. This is increasingly less true, however, as the rate of family dissolution increases. More importantly, the statement is based on equating the high death rate of spouses in 1900 with the high divorce rate today, thus masking what many believe are profound psychological and social differences (especially for children) between death and divorce.

Closely related to family dissolution is another feature of contemporary Swedish life that has been widely commented on in the West: The high percentage of single parent families. In 1980, single parent

families amounted to 18% of all households with children (with another 11% of households with children consisting of step-families.) This percentage of single parent families is very high by European standards, but not quite as high as the 21.5% of all families with children in the United States in 1980. Sweden takes the lead, however, if one discounts the data for U.S. blacks, an ethnic group that is extremely small in Sweden. In 1980, 17% of American white families with children had only a single parent compared to 52% of black families. Both nations have seen a sharp increase in the number of single parent families in recent years, and in both nations women make up the overwhelming majority of these families' heads. (It should be noted that the economic and social situation of the single parent family in Sweden, although worse than that of complete families there, is not characterized by the high level of relative deprivation that is found in the United States.)

CONCLUSION

What is happening to the Swedish family? The facts noted above indicate that something important is happening, and it is not just that Swedes living in families are less well-off economically compared to Swedes living outside of families. There is nothing in the data I have seen to suggest that the Swedish family is in a state of "collapse," or anywhere near such a state. But the data do suggest, in my opinion, that there should be much more research and public discussion about the possible consequences of current Swedish family trends, especially the personal and social consequences of such a high rate of family dissolution.

The author alone is responsible for the opinions expressed in this article.

LITERATURE

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